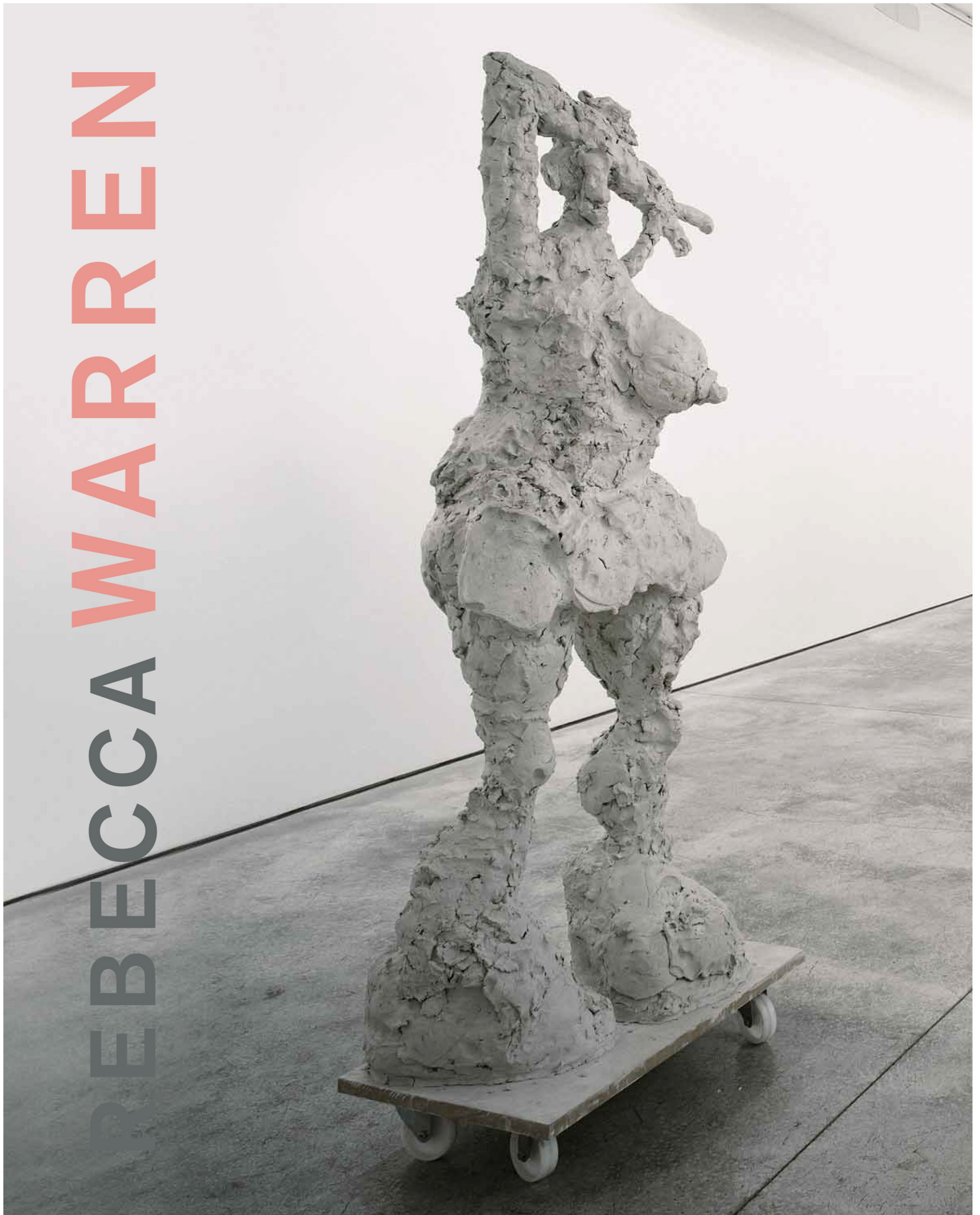


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REBECCA WARREN

Rebecca Warren

Mad and Ugly

NEAL BROWN

Rebecca Warren often seems to be in character in her work and this, in combination with the wryly detached or separated quality of her intonation, facilitates her success. Abstracted from the gravity of sensible analysis, the tragicomedy of life's misshapen pleasures and problems can then float deliriously free in the outer space of the artist's brave psychology. In this way, Warren overcomes the problem of how an artist, especially a female artist, can negotiate intimate bodily images while, at the same time, resisting an autobiographical interpretation. Everyone knows that to reference Edgar Degas, Pablo Picasso, Auguste Rodin, and Robert Crumb in your work, as Warren does, is to summon hard-core males whose artistic genius includes (subject to certain interpretative qualifications) rampant sexual triumphalism. But Warren holds her esteemed giants of art in critical abeyance, which is not that of Stockholm syndrome, nor that of the attitudinal fearlessness characteristic of the UK's current aristocracy of female artists like Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin. Warren's interest in the trademark conquests made by the male artists that she gathers together—gender outrages of unlikely breasts and bodily objectification—seems to be in their reductive physicality as much as anything else, from which she squeezes something more universal and tragic than just sexual triumphalism.

Warren's narrative includes childhood themes shaped within the white, virginal clay she uses; it is a special, self-setting kind of clay related to the earthy brown clay of the potter but which never needs be fired in a kiln, and so it retains the delicate "skin" quality of its youth. The pretty pastel colors that the artist sometimes applies to this unsullied whiteness, the effete ribbons her figures sometimes wear, and the doll, toy, or cartoon quality that pervades many of her works, all relate to (a usually female) childhood. Materially, the white clay is

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related to children's modeling compounds but, stylistically, in Warren's hands, more to the anarchic little Plasticine sculptures, piles of mess, and spent chewing gum that children like to leave behind. Such discord is epitomized in Warren's appropriation of Degas' famous little ballerina (LITTLE DANCER AGED FOURTEEN, 1880–81), who she subverts in her own THE TWINS (2004) and COME, HELGA (2006) by displacing the ballerina's delicate, modest stance with a gauche, lumpy physicality, twice over.

As happens to lots of people, for lots of reasons—some biological, some socially ordained, some accidental—things go wrong when puberty signals the change from auto-acting childhood to the reacting self-consciousness of adolescence and adulthood. The consequences can include self-doubt, shame, insecurity, sadness, and fear. Although women are particularly diminished by gender expectation and fashion magazine perfectionism, there is a kind of disillusionment, if not perceptual collapse, that people have of their bodily selves that is not gender specific, and which relates to a lack of self-acceptance. This breakdown of bodily self-esteem affects men as well as women, for whom disordered equivalences between erotic or romantic sexuality, physical appearance, and identity can become overwhelming. These manifestations can be tragically comic, as well as catastrophic, and aspects of such dysphoric breakdowns can be seen in Warren's DEUTSCHE BANK (2002), PRIVATE SCHMIDT (2004), and LOG LADY (2003). Art—clay—is a very good way of interpreting or emphasizing bodily physicality, and the frenzied buttocks, vulvas, nipples, clitoral folds, and penises of Warren's work are part of a mad, discontinuous, physical hyphenism. Warren works her soft clay into something that is exultant, orgasmic, libidinous, fleshy, autoerotic, and pleasurable; her figures and plinth pieces are then fingered and improperly squeezed into something that is compulsively chaotic, masturbatory, fat, ugly, disgusted, repressed, incontinent, excretory, bestial, bulimic, collapsed, hung-over, unidentifiable, abject, debased, and self-critical. In other words, her work is a highly adjectival chaos of bodily regard: the pleasurable—less significant than the dysphoric.

Complex psychological inter-correlations between the Picasso that Warren summons in pieces like SHE (2003) and the Rembrandt that Picasso repeatedly summons in etchings from his 347 SERIES (1968) create an unlikely convergence between these three artists on the theme of failure. Picasso's 1968 etchings collectively depict wild, sexual, and other fantasies, in which he uses esteemed artists, such as Rembrandt, as avatars, casting himself as a voyeur. Rembrandt's own self-portraits equate to tragic physicality, the pain of his life's duress, deaths, and failures becoming the "gold" of his art, created from the mining of ignominious physiology—like Picasso, Rembrandt did not care for obvious beauty and can still shock people with his interest in what is considered "ugly." Picasso's depictions of Rembrandt within his etchings (he depicted Rembrandt many times during his career) were not just the honoring of an artist he revered; they were also meant to employ Rembrandt as a character player in the struggle between desire, propriety, ability, and failure. This was especially so towards the end of Picasso's life, as the artist's libido strutted and then crawled its way to the impotent death it feared so much. Rembrandt was, for Picasso, the acceptable representation of failure—the failure that Picasso so wished to avoid himself.

In HELMUT CRUMB (1998) and HOMAGE TO R. CRUMB, MY FATHER (2003), Warren references Robert Crumb, whose cartoons are another complex adjunct to this theme. Crumb's relationship with sexual failure and triumph is a horribly frank and funny one, which includes as much diminishment of women as any misogynist male (or misanthropist female) could wish for, but which also includes highly eroticized, appreciative affirmation of

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REBECCA WARREN, *PRIVATE SCHMIDT*, 2004,
reinforced clay, MDF, wheels, 72 7/8 x 35 7/8 x 35 7/8" /
SOLDAT SCHMIDT, verstärkter Ton,
MDF, Räder, 185 x 91 x 91 cm.

the particular bodily types that are regarded so unfavorably in females these days: wide hips, thick goose-thighs, big bottoms, and general big-bonedness. Elements of many sexual *paraphilias* can be seen in Crumb's work, such as *Saliromania*, which is the deriving of erotic pleasure from soiling or spoiling the object of desire. (This may include tearing or damaging their clothing, covering them in mud or filth, or otherwise disheveling them—a fetish that can also involve the defacing of statues or pictures of attractive people, especially celebrities, and the forming of collections of defaced art.) Crumb, as a cartoonist, also summons ideas of *Schediaphilia* (more humorously known as *Toonophilia*), which is love or sexual arousal towards cartoon characters. Crumb's work, unlike Warren's, includes visceral hatreds, often towards conventionally beautiful women and the highly esteemed status they enjoy, and it is possible to consider Warren's appropriation of him as allusive of the need, or not, to "earn" or "deserve" love in this world—for men as well as women—much of it centered around exaggerated ideas of beauty.

Warren's work (as she has described it herself) is "mad and ugly" and conflicting feelings of the loveable and unlovable run throughout it. These feelings could include those of being unlovable but sexually desired, and of being attractive but deliberately repellent—both of these states being purposeful disruptions of the usual sense of things. A similar contrary principle can be seen in Warren's vitrines which, although usually peripheral to her work—they are always shown on the walls, never in the center of her exhibited works—display irregular aspirations. The strange contents of these containers are devoid of sense, purpose, or known

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value, but are accorded a condition of damaged importance. They are highly deliberated presentations, to which a hard-won neutrality of intonation is critical—a “mad neutrality,” as important to her as a supposed even-handedness is to the institutional curator.

Even the wheeled plinths that support so many of Warren’s larger sculptures are implicated in her sense of contrary failure. The wheels imply carefree movement (skateboarding, roller-skating or whatever) but also emphasize the heavy fatness, bodily weight, and inertia of her figures, which would need to be overcome in order for movement to be possible. Inability and, by extension, disability could be invoked by this—possibly creating a familial relationship between the wheeled plinths and wheelchairs. And themes of disability could relate to the idea that Rembrandt’s *SLAUGHTERED OX* (1655)—a nude amputee, if ever there was one—is an art-historical antecedent for the potent category of expressive bodily limbleness in art, which would include works by Picasso, Warren, and Francis Bacon.

There are stylistic points of comparison between Warren and Bacon. These include a shared emphasis on reductive bodily physicality and truncated monstrosity, as well as similarities between Bacon’s spermy, Vaseline smearings and Warren’s slippery sexualizing of clay. That there could be “a female Francis Bacon” is a strangely appealing idea to consider, both in the abstract and in respect to Warren’s work. But it wouldn’t be correct to attempt to describe Warren as this impossible person. Unlike Bacon, her work is self-deprecating and not grandiose, and is infinitely wittier. More importantly, the idea of love—damaged and dysfunctional as this love might be—is not extinguished, and, in spite of all the debauchery and outrage, is characteristically the voice of Rebecca Warren.



REBECCA WARREN, *DEUTSCHE BANK*, 2002,
reinforced clay, MDF, wheels, 29¹/₈ x 29¹/₈ x 29¹/₈" /
verstärkter Ton, MDF, Räder, 166 x 74 x 74 cm.